



GEORGE BUSH

'Not trying to make (it) difficult'

Bush sends Gorbachev letter on Lithuania

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Bush said Friday he had sent a confidential letter to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev on the crisis in Lithuania, assuring him "we're not trying to make things difficult" for either side.

White House officials indicated Gorbachev was under intense pressure to take a tough line toward the breakaway republic, and the administration continued trying to take a low-key approach.

In contrast, Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole, R-Kan., warned that "all bets are off" if Gorbachev resorts to force.

"The Soviets will be in real trouble here — no trade agreements, no trade preferences and no more of the kind of relations the Kremlin is desperately seeking from Washington," Dole said. "It would be a severe blow to U.S.-Soviet relations."

The White House said Bush's message, sent through diplomatic channels Thursday night, emphasized U.S. hopes for resolving the conflict by peaceful dialogue. Bush declined to divulge exactly what the letter said, calling it confidential.

"I do not want to risk misunderstanding by failing to communicate," Bush said.

It was his first contact with Gorbachev since tensions began escalating with Lithuania's March 11 declaration to secede from the Soviet Union.

"I want to be sure that the

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Soviets understand our position and understand that we're not trying to make things difficult for Lithuania or the Soviet Union or anybody else," the president said.

He cited the importance of "staying in touch and being sure there is no disconnect because of misinformation."

The United States has repeatedly voiced support for Lithuania's right to self determination.

At the same time, the Bush administration does not want the dispute to lead to the removal of Gorbachev, who has championed reforms in the Soviet Union and paved the way for the flowering of democratic governments in Eastern Europe.

A senior administration official said Gorbachev appears to be under "considerable domestic pressure" because of the Lithuanian crisis.

Lithuania's secession, by itself, would not be a critical episode for Moscow, the official said, "but if that then becomes the symbol for a whole bunch of areas around the periphery of the Soviet Union, that would be very difficult."

The official, who commented on condition of anonymity, said, "It

isn't in anybody's interest to have this thing blow up."

The White House has alternated between tough rhetoric and near silence about Moscow's response to Lithuania, first warning that use of force would backfire and disrupt superpower relations and then refusing to pass judgment on Soviet actions.

Maintaining that low-key approach, White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater said, "We have not seen any — too many episodes in the last few days that have been very dramatic.

"But the problem is not resolved," he said. "They're still searching for solutions and we're hopeful that can be worked out."

Bush has been criticized by some members of Congress for not being more aggressive in complaining about Soviet actions in Lithuania.

While acknowledging the criticism, Fitzwater said, "We believe our supporters far outnumber our critics on this issue."

In a display of solidarity with Lithuania, staged before news cameras, three conservative senators telephoned President Vytautas Landsbergis with words of encouragement for his struggle

against Moscow.

Afterward, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., said "Our role is to demand (independence) today, even though it may not be possible for a month. It is to be outspoken. I think we can be a useful tool (for Bush) and I don't mind lending ourselves for that purpose." The other senators were Republicans Frank Murkowski of Alaska and Connie Mack of Florida.

On Thursday, Fitzwater ruled out any direct contact by Bush with Gorbachev, saying the president "simply feels that this is not the time to make a direct contact."

Asked about the sudden reversal, Fitzwater said Bush was moved by, among other things, a telephone conversation Wednesday with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and a meeting Thursday with Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass.

Kennedy met with Gorbachev in Moscow on Monday. Mrs. Thatcher spoke with the Soviet leader by telephone this week.

Abortion

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upholding such a law.